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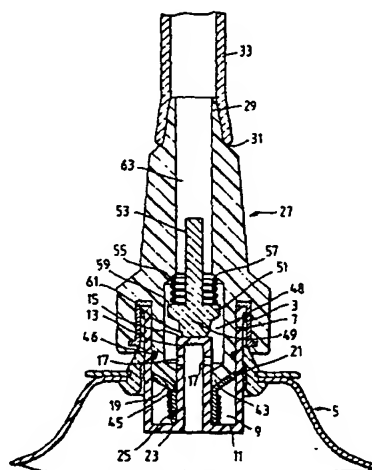
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Coupling.

A coupling, especially for a liquid handling system with a collapsible liquid container 5 and a tube 33 to receive liquid from the container, has a first interconnectable member 1,87 with a hollow post 13,93 and a biased sleeve 19,77 closing openings 17,97 for liquid outflow, together with a second interconnectable member 27,71 with a hollow sheath 91,77 and a biased piston 49,85 closing an opening at the end of the sheath. The parts are configured so that on coupling the post 13,93 unseats the piston 49,85 while the sheath 41,77 displaces the sleeve 19,99. The preferred construction minimises spillage on disconnection and enables various parts to be fabricated economically as plastic mouldings.

Fig.3.



COUPLING

The present invention concerns a coupling for interconnecting two hollow bodies, especially a container and a pipe.

European Patent Application No. 86200860.4 describes a liquid product packaging and dispensing assembly in which liquid is pumped from a container via a coupling and through a tube to the point of use. The mouth of the tube is fitted with a non-return valve to prevent leakage of liquid when the tube is uncoupled from the container. In one form, the container may be collapsible and is preferably situated inside a box for convenience during storage and transport.

We have appreciated that various problems exist with such systems employing flexible containers. One problem is that once the tube is uncoupled from the container, the mouth of the latter is open so that air enters as the walls of the container tend to resume their original shape. This means that on reconnection, the pump first draws air which is particularly disadvantageous when the system is part of a time-dependent operation where it is important for liquid to be drawn substantially immediately. Whilst entry of air could be prevented using a pop-return valve, as with stopping leakage from the tube, this does not overcome a second problem, namely that rough handling or dropping of the container after uncoupling results in contents spilling out of the mouth. A non-return valve is inappropriate here because with both normal use and spillage, liquid is caused to exit from the container. Moreover, the use of two non-return valves (one of the container and one for the tube) results in increased flow resistance, requiring a greater pumping capacity. This is because such non-return valves are opened by the liquid pressure differential across them.

A further problem arising with such containers is that on uncoupling the container from the tube, residues of any liquid which has been flowing through the coupling between them are apt to be spilled. This can be hazardous if the liquid is noxious, for example if the liquid is a very alkaline product such as industrial mechanical dishwashing liquid. We have now found that these various problems can be ameliorated by utilising a particular form of coupling.

Although the form of coupling was devised particularly for the application indicated above and is advantageous for that, it could also be employed in other applications where it would be advantageous to provide a coupling preventing leakage from two hollow bodies when these are disconnected and also minimising spillage during disconnection.

Accordingly, the present invention provides a coupling for interconnecting two hollow bodies, the coupling comprising first and second interconnectable members for attachment of each one to an orifice of a respective body so as to allow fluid flow between the interiors of the bodies when interconnected by the coupling and to seal the orifices when uncoupled,

the first interconnectable member comprising a hollow post arranged for the interior of the post to communicate with the interior of the body to which the first member is attached, the hollow post having a closed end and one or more openings behind the end, the first member further comprising a sleeve around the post biased into a position covering the openings for sealing the orifice of the said body this sleeve being displaceable against the bias to a position uncovering the opening(s) for flow;

the second interconnectable member comprising a piston within a hollow sheath arranged for the interior of the sheath to communicate with the interior of the body to which the second interconnectable member is attached, the piston being biased into a position closing an aperture through an end portion of the sheath for sealing the orifice of the body to which the second member is attached, the said piston being displaceable against the bias to a position uncovering the aperture for flow; the post, sleeve, piston and sheath being configured such that upon connection of the interconnectable members the closed end of the post extends through the aperture in the sheath and displaces the piston against its bias, while the sheath displaces the sleeve against its bias, thereby allowing flow between the hollow interiors of the sheath and the post. It is strongly preferred that the post is a close fit through the said aperture in the end portion of the sheath.

The coupling specified above has the advantage that when it is disconnected both orifices are sealed, and it can be constructed to obviate spillage. A close fit of the sheath around the post is valuable for avoiding spillage upon disconnection, and the parts which move relative to each other during disconnection then tend to clean one another. It will generally be the case with such a coupling that as liquid flows from the hollow interior of the post to the hollow interior of the sheath, there is no need for the liquid to enter any space outside those hollow interiors and consequently upon disconnection of the interconnectable members there is substantially no fluid which is outside them and consequently likely to be spilled. A further advantage of such a coupling is that by avoid-

ing the use of non-return valves the flow-rate efficiency is increased.

It will generally be desirable for the various parts to be co-axial, that is to say for the sheath and piston to be co-axial and for the sleeve and post to be co-axial and moreover for all four of them to lie on a common axis when coupled. It is preferable for the end portion of the sheath to be provided with an inwardly directed circumferential lip defining the said aperture at the end of the sheath and fitting closely around the post. Upon disconnection the lip can wipe the post as the latter is drawn through the aperture. The lip can conveniently also define a valve seat against which the said piston within the sheath is biased.

It will generally not be necessary to provide any part closely surrounding the exterior of the end portion of the sheath and there may well be an axially extending air space around this, possibly with further parts spaced radially outwardly from the end portion of the sheath by such an air space.

As mentioned above, the coupling of the present invention was particularly devised for one interconnectable member (which may be either the first or the second of the two interconnectable members) to be attached to an orifice of a container. This may in particular be a deformable container such as a bag which will progressively collapse as it is emptied. The other of the two interconnectable members can then be connected to a tube or pipe intended to be placed in communication with the container by means of the coupling. As used herein, the terms "pipe" and "tube" can be taken to be synonymous.

The present invention extends to a handling system for a liquid product, which system comprises a container for the product, apparatus including a tube to receive product from the container, and a coupling as set forth above with one of the two interconnectable members of the coupling attached to an orifice of the container and the other of the two interconnectable members of the coupling attached to the tube. Then, the coupling allows flow from the container to the tube and also disconnection of the container from the apparatus while minimising spillage. Although it is particularly envisaged that the coupling will be employed to allow flow from the container to the tube, there is no reason why the coupling could not be used in a reverse arrangement where it was desired to pump liquid into the container. It will generally be the case, however, that there is flow in only a single direction at any one instant with no provision for counter-current flow of any kind.

In a further development of the invention, one of the two interconnectable members includes or is connected to a chamber having means for detecting the presence of liquid in the chamber.

Preferably this will be the interconnectable member which is connected to a tube. This preferred feature is useful in systems handling a liquid product where it is necessary or desirable to detect that the container has emptied and then shut off a pump and/or sound an alarm calling for the container to be replaced. For detecting liquid in the chamber, the chamber may contain spaced apart electrodes so that the liquid when present provides a conductive path between the electrodes. Whatever means are used to detect the presence of liquid, it may be desirable for the chamber to have a valve which is biased closed but arranged to open to admit air to the chamber in the event that a pre-determined sub-atmospheric pressure is created within the chamber, for example if a pump drawing from the chamber is continuing to run when the supplying container is empty.

The present invention will now be better explained by way of the following exemplary but non-limiting embodiment, and with reference to the accompanying drawings in which:-

Figure 1 shows in axial cross section, a member of a coupling embodying the invention, when attached to a deformable bag;

Figure 2 shows in axial cross section, a section member of a coupling embodying the invention, when attached to a pipe;

Figure 3 shows in axial cross section, the apparatus of Figures 1 and 2 when interconnected in accordance with the invention;

Figure 4 shows in axial cross section, the first and second members of a coupling which is a second embodiment of the invention, with liquid in the first member; and

Figure 5 shows in axial cross section, the coupling of Figures 1 and 2 when the two members of the coupling are interconnected.

Figure 1 shows a first member 1 of a coupling inserted in orifice 3 of a deformable bag 5, in sealed relation thereto. The first member and bag (fragment only shown) are substantial rotationally symmetric about the central vertical axis. The first member comprises a cylindrical wall 7 defining a chamber 9, from the floor 11 of which extends a post 13, closed at the top by a surface 15. Below this surface radial openings 17 are provided in the post. These openings are closed by a sleeve 19 which is fabricated to be splayed outwardly at its top end 21. The sleeve 19 is displaceable axially along the post. It is biased by means of a compression spring 25 surrounding the exterior surface 23 of the sleeve; this spring biases the sleeve to a position closing the radial openings 17 and the sleeve and post thus constitute a valve. As shown, any contents in the bag are unable to escape since the only possible exit, namely the openings 17, are blocked by the sleeve. Furthermore, any attempt

by the gab to reinflate is prevented by the sleeve 19, which will not be displaced by suction attempting to draw excess air into the bag.

The second member 27 shown in Figure 2 is likewise substantially rotationally symmetric about the central vertical axis. The top end 29 is sealably fixed in the open end 31 of tube (fragment only shown) 33. The lower end 35 of the second member is provided with an annular recess 37 and a flexible washer 39. This arrangement serves to effect sealing to the first member as described in more detail hereinbelow. At the bottom-most part of the lower end of the second member, there is a protrusion 41 constituting a sheath and having an inwardly and downwardly directed lip 43 defining a circular aperture 45 at its end. Further to effect sealing between the first and second members (to be described further), a rubber O-ring 46 is located within an annular groove 47 on the outside of the sheath 41.

Within the interior chamber 48 of the hollow sheath 41 is a piston 49 having a head 51 and a shaft 53. A compression spring 55 located within the chamber 48, surrounds the shaft and impinges on shoulders 57 and 59 of the chamber and piston head respectively. The head is made of a material such that as the spring urges it downwardly, a nipple 61 thereon closes the hole 45, thereby creating a seal. Thus, any contents in the tube cannot escape via channel 63 leading to the chamber. The lip 43 constitutes a valve seat against which the piston 49 is urged.

As depicted in Figure 3, the first and second members are coupled by locating the top of the cylindrical wall 7 of the first member within the annular recess 37 of the second member in a snug fitting arrangement. Sealing between the two members is brought about by abutment between the top edge of the cylindrical wall and the washer 39, and by compression of the O-ring 46 against the upright inner surface of said cylindrical wall. The first and second members may be removably held together simply by interference fit. Alternatively, this may be effected by means of screw threading or by a bayonet-fit arrangement (neither shown) in a manner which will readily be apparent to those skilled in the art.

From Figure 3, it will be seen that the closed top surface 15 of the post 13 acts upon the nipple 61 of the piston, forcing it to retract against the bias of the spring 59 which is thereby compressed. At the same time, the lower surface of the end portion of the sheath 41 engages the upper splayed end 21 of flexible sleeve 19 and pushes it downwardly against the bias of the spring 25, which is thereby compressed. Retraction of the sleeve uncovers the openings 17 in the post, which in this configuration are now situated within cham-

ber 48. Thus, it will be appreciated that the head 51 of the piston, in co-operation with the spring 59 and the hole 45, act as a valve which is closed when the first and second members are uncoupled. However, in the coupled state, the upper surface of the post acts to open said valve. Similarly, the flexible sleeve in combination with the spring 25 and the opening 17, function as a further valve which is also closed when the two members are uncoupled. In the coupled position, the end portion of the sheath 41 acts to open this further valve.

The result of this operation is that when the first and second members are apart, no contents of either the bag or the tube can escape. When they are coupled, the valves open, interconnecting the bag and tube so that fluid can pass therebetween. Flow is direct from the hollow inside of the post 13, through the openings 17, to the interior chamber 48 of the sheath 41 and then to the channel 63, or *vice versa*. It will be appreciated that in the coupled state, fluid can pass the piston head 51 since the shoulder 59 is not flush with the chamber walls. However, to facilitate fluid flow, axial holes or circumferential grooves (neither shown) may be situated in the piston shoulder, provided they are in such positions as not to prevent the piston nipple from forming a sealing with the hole 45. This can also serve to circumvent any resistance to flow which is presented by the spring 55 in its compressed state. Upon disconnection the two members of the coupling separate without liquid being able to flow out from the hollow interiors of the post and sheath into any surrounding space and moreover the movement of the lip 43 along the post 13 tends to clean the post.

Figures 4 and 5 show a second embodiment which is the converse of that in Figures 1 to 3. The coupling's second interconnectable member 71 (i.e. the member with piston and sheath) is inserted in the orifice of a deformable bag 5, in sealed relation to it. A collar 73 provides a tubular mouth sealed to the bag and a fitting 75 is screw-threaded to this collar. An inner part of this fitting provides a sheath 77 with an inwardly directed lip 79. The fitting 75 is shaped to retain enlarged heads 81 at each end of an elastic strip 83. The elastic strip 83 biases a piston 85 upwardly to seat against the lip 79 and so close the aperture defined by this lip.

The first interconnectable member 87 of the coupling has a spigot 88 for connection indirectly to a tube (not shown) receiving liquid from the container. The second member 87 has an outer housing 89 accommodating an inner sleeve 91 from which a hollow post 93 extends. The end 95 of the hollow post is closed and just behind the end 95 are radial holes 97. These are surrounded by a sleeve 99 displaceable axially against the bias of a spring 101 to expose the holes 97.

The coupled condition of these two interconnectable members is shown in Figure 5. The fitting 75 of the first interconnectable member and the outer case 89 of the second member are shaped to make a bayonet-type connection coupled by pushing the member together and then twisting to engage radially outwardly projecting lugs 103 of the fitting 75 behind radially inwardly projecting lugs 105 of the housing 89. As the two interconnectable members are pushed together, the flat end 95 of the post 93 presses on the piston 85 unseating it from the lip 79. The end portion of the post 95 passes through the aperture defined by the lip 79 into the hollow space 107 within the sheath 77 and the extremity of the lip 79 contacts the extremity of the sleeve 99 and causes it to retract against the bias of spring 101. The end face of the fitting 73 abuts, and seals against, the housing 89. Upon uncoupling, the lip 79 wipes the end portion of the post as that end portion is withdrawn through the aperture defined by the lip 79.

The first interconnectable member incorporates a conductivity cell used to set off an alarm if the liquid in the container runs out. An end piece 111 made of electrically insulating material extends into the sleeve 91 and is retained there by a screwcap 113. The end piece 111 includes the spigot 88 to attach to a flexible tube. The end piece 111 includes a short pipe 117 through which liquid is drawn out of the chamber 119. An electrode 121 extends through the end piece 111 and is exposed to liquid on the inside of the pipe 117. A second electrode 123 also extends through the end piece but is on the outside of pipe 117. When there is an adequate supply of liquid, the pipe 117 and chamber 119 are both sufficiently filled with liquid to provide a conductive path between the two electrodes. If, however, the supply of liquid from the container 5 runs out, a pump continuing to suck through the tube connected to the spigot 88 will create a sub-atmospheric pressure in the chamber 119.

On the side of the housing 89 a small lateral port closed by a screwcap 125 communicates with a narrow passageway 127 leading into the chamber 119. The screwcap 125 has a central aperture which provides a seat for a sealing ball 129 of a conventional non-return valve which in normal operation closes the central aperture in the cap 125 and blocks any leakage via the passageway 127. The non-return valve is arranged so that it will open in response to a sub-atmospheric pressure within the chamber 119 of approximately 0.3 bar below atmospheric. Such a sub-atmospheric pressure, sufficient to unseat the non-return valve, can be created by pump suction when the supply of liquid runs out. When this happens the ball 129 unseats, the air is admitted to the chamber 119

until the eventual entry of air into the tube 117 breaks the liquid conductive path between the electrodes 121, 123. This may occur when sufficient air has been admitted to expose the extremity of electrode 123, as illustrated in Figure 4. Failing that air will enter the short tube 117 until the electrode 121 is no longer contacted by liquid. In either event, when electric current ceases to flow between the electrodes, automatic control circuitry shuts off the pump and sounds an alarm to warn an operator that the container 5 is empty and must be replaced.

In both embodiments above, virtually all the parts except for the compression springs can be moulded from plastics material.

Modifications are possible. In particular, in the coupling of Figures 4 and 5, the elastic strip 83 could be replaced by a compression spring accommodated in an apertured fixed housing and acting on a suitably shaped piston. Also, instead of the conductivity cell formed by electrodes 121, 123 within chamber 119, a space within this chamber could be partitioned off by a pressure-tight flexible membrane, arranged to flex and thus slightly move its position in response to a subatmospheric pressure in the remainder of the chamber 119. Movement of the membrane could then operate a micro-switch in the partitioned-off part of the chamber.

Claims

1. A coupling for interconnecting two hollow bodies, the coupling comprising first and second interconnectable members for attachment of each one to an orifice of a respective body so as to allow fluid flow between the interiors of the bodies when interconnected by the coupling and to seal the orifices when uncoupled,

the first interconnectable member comprising a hollow post arranged for the interior of the post to communicate with the interior of the body to which the first member is attached, the hollow post having a closed end and one or more openings behind the end, the first member further comprising a sleeve around the post biased into a position covering the openings to prevent outflow from the interior of the post and seal the orifice of the said body, this sleeve being displaceable against the bias to a position uncovering the opening(s) for flow;

the second interconnectable member comprising a piston within a hollow sheath arranged for the interior of the sheath to communicate with the interior of the body to which the second interconnectable member is attached, the piston being biased into a position closing an aperture through an end portion of the sheath for sealing the orifice of the body

to which the second member is attached, the said piston being displaceable against the bias to a position uncovering the aperture for flow; the post, sleeve, piston and sheath being configured such that upon connection of the interconnectable members the closed end of the post extends through the aperture in the sheath and displaces the piston against its bias, while the sheath displaces the sleeve against its bias, thereby allowing flow between the hollow interiors of the sheath and the post, the post being a close fit through the said aperture in the end portion of the sheath.

2. A coupling according to claim 1 wherein, when disconnected, there is an airspace around the exterior of the end portion of the sheath through which the post extends when the coupling is connected.

3. A coupling according to either of the preceding claims wherein the piston is biased by an elastic element.

4. A coupling according to any one of the preceding claims wherein the end portion of the sheath is provided with an inwardly directed circumferential lip defining the said aperture in the sheath and which fits closely around the post.

5. A coupling according to claim 4 wherein the said lip defines a valve seat against which the said piston is biased.

6. A coupling according to any one of the preceding claims wherein one of the two said interconnectable members includes or is connected to a chamber having means for detecting presence or absence of liquid.

7. A coupling according to claim 6 wherein the chamber contains spaced apart electrodes for detecting liquid providing a conductive path between the electrodes, the chamber having a valve biased closed but arranged to open to admit air to the chamber in response to a predetermined sub-atmospheric pressure within the chamber.

8. A coupling according to any one of the preceding claims wherein one of the two interconnectable members is attached to an orifice of a container and the other of the interconnectable members is attached to a tube.

9. A coupling according to claim 8 wherein the container is a deformable bag.

10. A handling system for a liquid product comprising a container for the product, apparatus including a tube to receive product from the container, and a coupling according to any one of the preceding claims, with one of the two interconnectable members attached to an orifice of the container and the other of the two interconnectable members being attached to the tube, whereby the coupling allows flow from the container to the tube and disconnection of the container from the apparatus without spillage.

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Fig. 1.

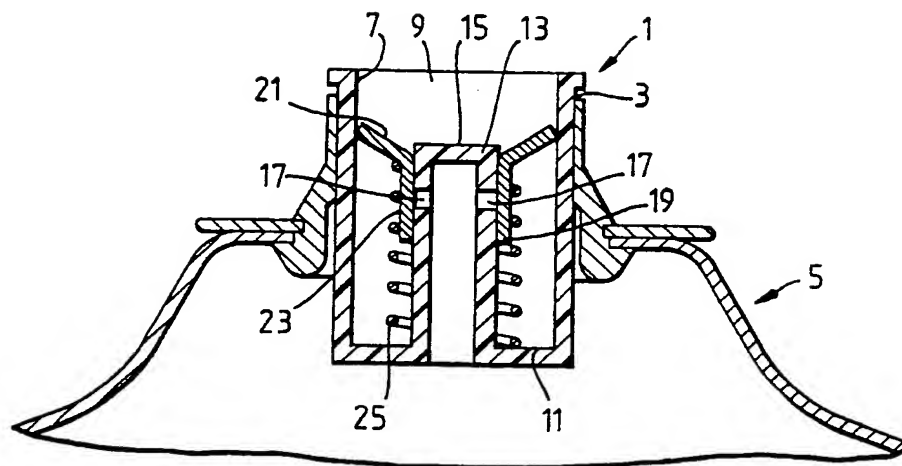


Fig. 2.

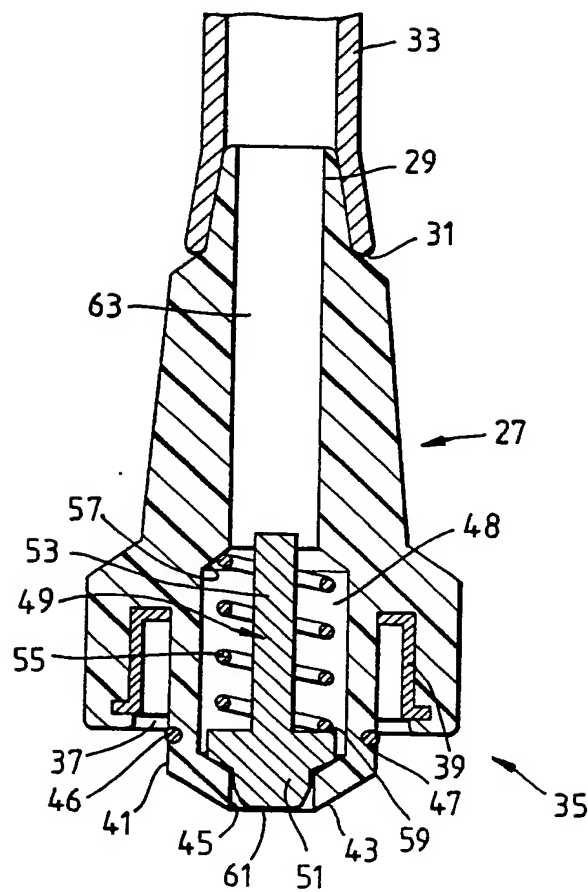


Fig. 4.

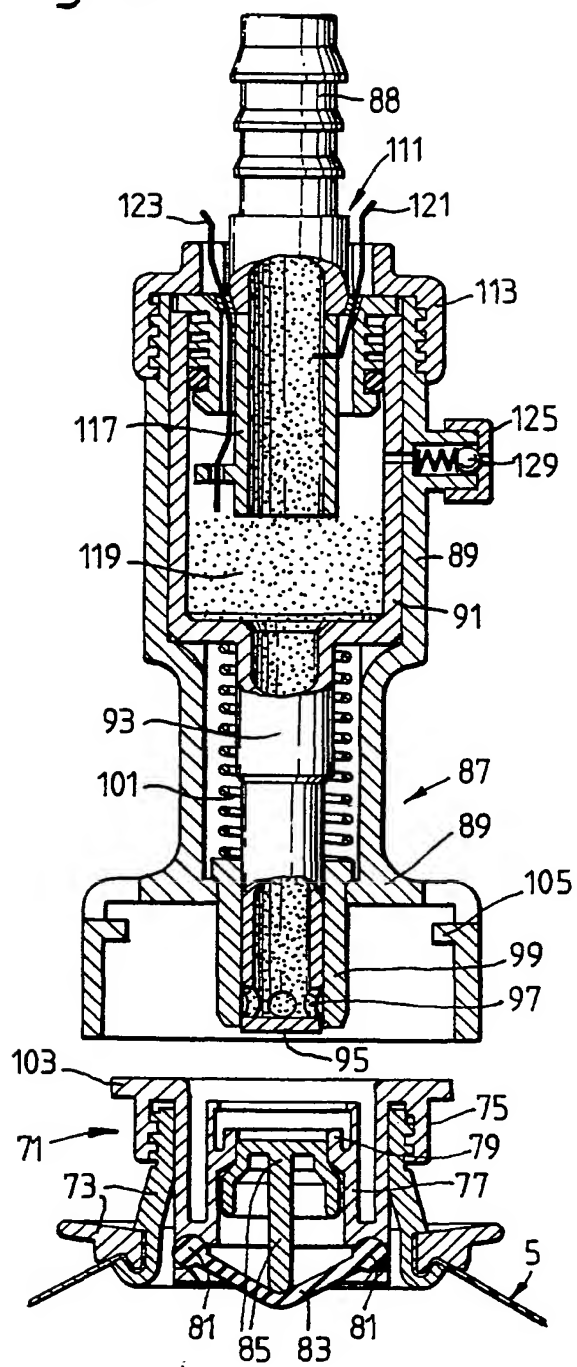
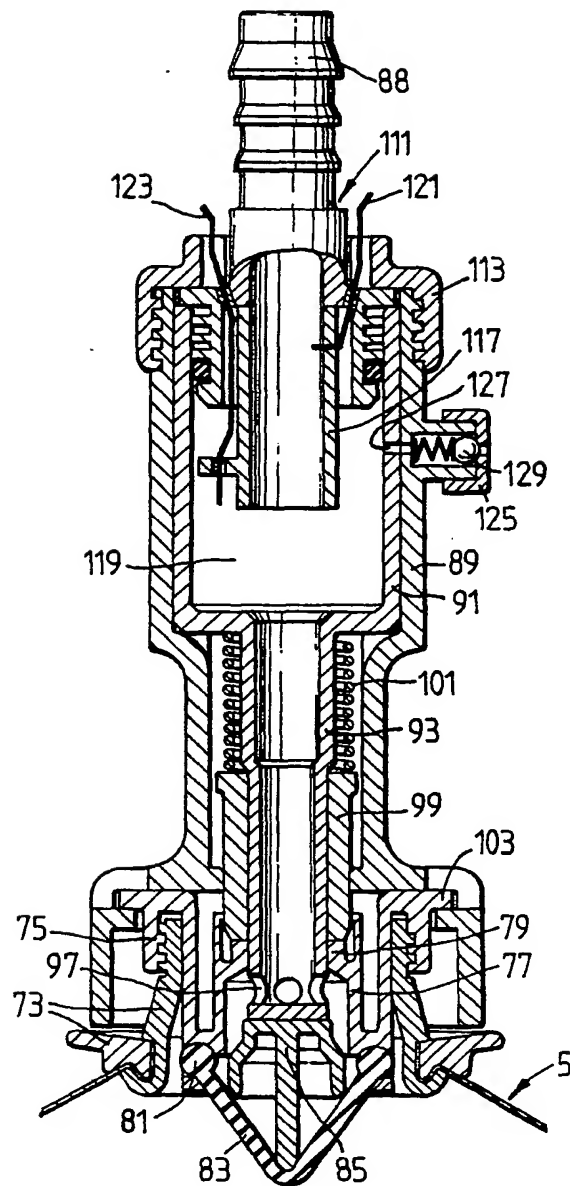


Fig. 5.



DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT			
Category	Citation of document with indication, where appropriate, of relevant passages	Relevant to claim	CLASSIFICATION OF THE APPLICATION (Int. Cl. 4)
Y	GB-A-1 348 654 (TAUBENHEIM) * Figures 3-5; page 3, line 81 - page 4, line 95 *	1-3,6,8 ,9	B 67 D 1/08 F 16 L 29/00
Y	FR-A- 827 785 (ROTADISK APPARATEBAU) * Figure 1; page 2, line 38 - page 3, line 12 *	1-3,6,8 ,9	
D,Y	EP-A-0 204 362 (UNILEVER N.V.) * Claims 1-8 *	6,9	
A	FR-A-1 568 991 (ETABLISSEMENTS GUIOT)		
A	US-A-3 670 929 (BERRY)		
A	US-A-3 687 161 (GRGURIC)		
			TECHNICAL FIELDS SEARCHED (Int. Cl. 4)
			B 67 D F 16 L
The present search report has been drawn up for all claims			
Place of search THE HAGUE		Date of completion of the search 24-02-1988	Examiner DEUTSCH J.P.M.
CATEGORY OF CITED DOCUMENTS X : particularly relevant if taken alone Y : particularly relevant if combined with another document of the same category A : technological background O : non-written disclosure P : intermediate document T : theory or principle underlying the invention E : earlier patent document, but published on, or after the filing date D : document cited in the application L : document cited for other reasons & : member of the same patent family, corresponding document			